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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: PM MELES DISCUSSES TRAJECTORY OF
BIALTERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH ASSISTANT SECRETARY LOWENKRON

REF: ADDIS ABABA 749

Classified By: ACTING POL-ECON COUNSELOR ERIC WONG. REASONS: 1.4 (B),
(D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: PM Meles told visiting Assistant Secretary Lowenkron on March 15 that governance issues remain a priority for the GOE. While Meles admitted that the GOE made mistakes before the May 2005 national elections as well as in responding to June and November 2005 anti-government demonstrations, he reiterated that government intervention had been necessary to stop the demonstrations. Meles denied a request to see the detainees, asserting that visits by foreign officials only encouraged them to seek redress outside the Ethiopian system. Disputing some reports by international NGOs of human rights abuses, Meles said Ethiopian officials nevertheless sought to correct "institutional failures" that caused them. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) DRL A/S Lowenkron, accompanied by DAS Jeffrey Krilla and DRL Foreign Affairs Officers Karen Gilbride and Melike Yetken, met with Prime Minister Meles March 15 during a two-day visit to Ethiopia. Charge and poloff (note-taker) also accompanied A/S Lowenkron.

DEMOCRACY IS ESSENTIAL

¶3. (C) A/S Lowenkron began by stating that Ethiopia is a country where two stories can unfold: a country where democratic reforms progress, including parliamentary reforms, plans to strengthen and appoint a new National Electoral Board (NEB), and a proposed new media law is under discussion; and a country where more than 100 opposition party members have been detained on charges of treason. A/S Lowenkron pointed out that the latter story dominated, and this despite the positive trajectory in the overall bilateral relationship.

¶4. (C) PM Meles acknowledged the dichotomy and stated that the trajectory for growth and development in Ethiopia was good, citing four years of positive economic growth and development of rural areas. The current focus is on governance issues and democracy is essential for the survival of Ethiopia. Some in Ethiopia "are still fighting the old civil war" (albeit politically, not with guns) and have not yet accepted the new constitutional order of an Ethiopia made

up of regional states (as opposed to the unitary empire state of the 19th century). The task of reconfiguring and democratizing a country with no history of democratic governance is further complicated by pervasive poverty and the glare of global attention. Nevertheless, the PM stated, Ethiopia is committed to democratization out of its own conviction, not to satisfy any outside interests.

PLAYING BY ETHIOPIAN RULES

15. (C) PM Meles said opposition leaders, civil society members and journalists had taken unfair advantage of Ethiopia's developing democracy and had challenged the constitutional order. The PM admitted that the GOE had also made mistakes. In the run-up to the election, he said, local media abused freedom of the press to publish articles fostering ethnic tensions. Just before the November demonstrations, he summoned opposition party leadership, together with members of the diplomatic community, to discuss how to avoid public disturbances. "I told members of the opposition that the only protection they have is the rule of law in Ethiopia," Meles recalled, noting that the opposition interpreted the meeting as conveying to them that support from the diplomatic community would provide immunity for engaging in illegal actions.

NO ACCESS TO CUD DETAINEES

16. (C) PM Meles denied A/S Lowenkron's request for himself as

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well for the International Committee of the Red Cross for access to the Hailu Shawel trial detainees. The PM stated that periodic court appearances and visits by family members are sufficient to demonstrate that there are no credible reports of mistreatment of the detainees. Visits by some the international community proved to be counter-productive when the detainees began to believe that they could receive better protection outside Ethiopian law. Meles said that as some foreign missions intentionally encouraged the detainees to defy the GOE, he had decided that international representatives would no longer be allowed to visit the detainees.

DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS DEPENDS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

17. (C) The PM said that while he and others in the GOE worked hard to respond to human rights queries, particularly those made by Amnesty International (AI), at this point "we have nearly given up." Meles asserted that several AI reports on human rights abuses by the GOE have subsequently proven false. "We have almost given up disputing these reports, and instead are focused on what we are doing here." When human rights abuses in Ethiopia are discovered, the GOE identifies and corrects the "institutional failures" that caused them, rather than stressing punishment, Meles said. A/S Lowenkron noted that responding to numerous questions by international NGOs can be challenging, but stressed the importance of the GOE continuing to work with civil society, both in governance and human rights issues. A/S Lowenkron presented Meles with the Secretary of State's guiding principles for NGOs.

18. (C) A/S Lowenkron described for the PM the discussions he had had with Secretary Rice on the meaning of democracy promotion. Democracy promotion should be seen as a three-legged stool comprised of free and fair elections; post-election activity (institution building and good governance by the ruling party) and a vibrant civil society. With reference to Ethiopia, Lowenkron expressed hope that a new National Electoral Board (NEB) could lead to free and

fair elections, and a new press law could help ensure a level playing field for the opposition. A/S Lowenkron also underscored the need to work on recent parliamentary reforms and other means to achieve a more inclusive political system. The third leg, civil society, was an area that Ethiopia had to focus on as well. Lowenkron said, without which the stool would not be balanced.

¶9. (C) PM Meles agreed that this was a helpful way to view and evaluate the status of a democracy. He also noted that the Carter Center had commended the NEB for work done on the 2005 elections but added that naming a new board of directors of the NEB may foster rapprochement with the opposition. Regarding civil society, he said that the GOE supports active domestic citizen organizations but is less accepting of international NGOs that are "accountable to a source of finance, but not to membership." The PM noted that National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute were expelled before the May 2005 parliamentary election because the outcome of the election became more important to them than the process of the election. In fact international electoral observers have taken on an additional role in African elections, PM Meles said, that of legitimizing elections, which is then linked to development assistance. There is also the danger that they become part of the process and try to play the role of king-maker. When pressed by A/S Lowenkron, the PM said that while having international observers for local elections (planned for late 2007-early 2008) is not customary, he suggested that it would be possible for NDI and IRI to return to Ethiopia in the future.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The PM was forthcoming in this frank and friendly meeting that lasted nearly an hour and a half. While he provided more nuance of what he sees as underlying problems in moving towards democratic governance, his presentation of the political landscape is consistent with recent statements. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Assistant Secretary Lowenkron cleared this message.

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